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Collection: A Transformation of art into fashion

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

COLLECTION: A TRANSFORMATION OF ART INTO FASHION

by

Kristin France

Spring 1994

APPROVALS

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Chapter 1

Introduction

For over a year now, the words “What are you going to do for your thesis?” has been reverberating in my head. There were several answers to the question. I have always been torn between two passions, painting and fashion design. After careful consideration, I decided to create a collection of clothing with a primary focus on knitwear and with a secondary focus on combining Celtic art and my own. The purpose of my thesis was to transform my art into fashion.

Since I have completed my undergraduate degree in fashion, I knew my plan of attack in designing the collection. I started by scouring fashion magazines, shopping malls, costume history books, and, most importantly, I watched everyday people. All the while, I did many brainstorming sketches, along with scribbling down words that capture the mood, character, and overall design of the collection.

Soon I was able to visualize the style of the collection. The colors are borrowed from the countryside of Ireland. I gravitated toward earthy tones, such as a variety of shades of green, hints of purple that recall Irish heather, blues that reflect the stormy skies in the lakes, and browns that seemed dug from the peat bogs.

Along with the general tones of color, I thought about the silhouettes of the finished designs. Elsa Schiaparelli stated in her autobiography, “...that clothes had to be architectural: that the body must never be forgotten and it

must be used as a frame is used in a building... The more the body is respected, the better the dress acquires vitality.”¹ Taking this idea into consideration, the clothes had to flow along with the body, following natural curves of the figure. This has to be done carefully so that the end product does not constrict, since part of the character of the collection was to be comfortable.

Another characteristic of the collection was that I wanted it to be feminine, but not by adding puffs and frills. The clothes would be simple and clean cut. Also, there would be underlying feelings of mysticism, romance and the whimsical (because fashion should not be taken too seriously).

The last ingredient in formulating the thesis was incorporating art. I asked myself the same question as Paul Poiret: “Am I a fool when I dream of putting art into my dresses, a fool when I say that dressmaking is an art?”² Somehow the clothing had to reflect my art, and the art that I feel a strong connection with, which is the art of the Celts. Both use a variety of line weights, curves, spirals, knotwork, overlapping, and intertwining.



The Block Sweater

Chapter 2

The Road to Discovery

Part 1: The Block Sweater

When I started to work on the thesis in the fall I seemed to have ignored some of my initial ideas. The Block Sweater was my first piece. I created this piece because it possessed an interesting design problem. The design problem was the structure of the garment was also the ornament of the garment. In all of my pieces, none of the ornament is applied, unless it serves a specific function.

The first sample piece of this sweater consisted of several knitted squares, which were arbitrary in the calculation of dimensions. The blocks were then dyed in my various earthy colors. I ironed them flat and tacked them to a piece of cork. The blocks were arranged so there was an open window. In the window, contrasting yarns were threaded by using a hook to create a warp. Another color yarn was then intertwined through the warp, which created a woven patch between the knitted squares. After completing a small area using this technique, I realized the weaving was too tedious. More importantly, the blocks had to be completely calculated and mapped out before I even attempted to knit.

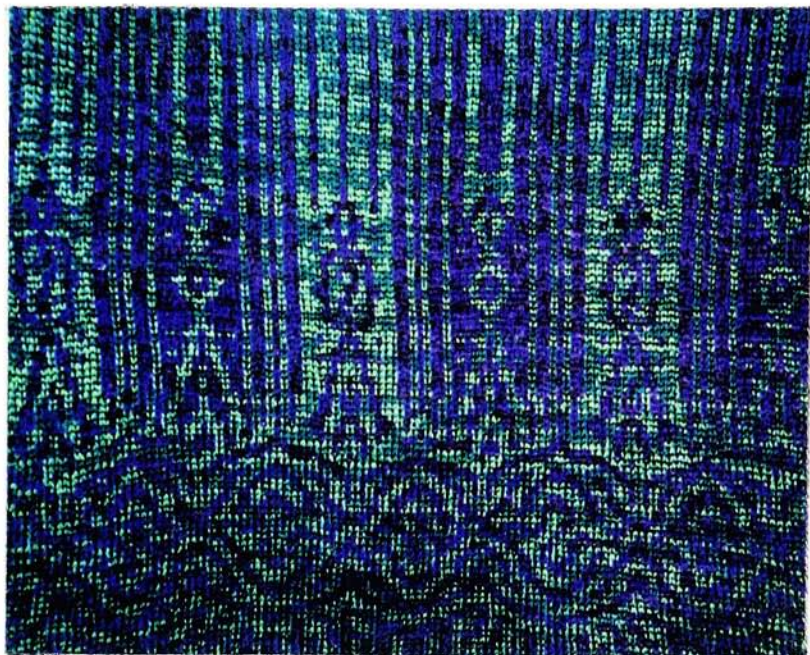
This time I started by making a basic flat pattern. The basic form was boxy to accommodate the shape of the squares that would be pieced together. From the pattern, I did a mock up in muslin to insure a proper fit. The bodice of the sweater was then divided into horizontal sections, or bands that wrapped

around the body. These bands gradually grew wider as they reached the bottom of the sweater. After knitting and measuring a few blocks of varying size, I was able to calculate the number of stitches and rows for every block in the sweater.

I knitted the blocks using an off white 5/2 cotton, and labeled their positions on the pattern. Once the knitting was done, I laid the pieces out and decided the placement of my colors among the squares. They were dyed either rust, mulberry, Nile green, dark green, or purple.

I was now ready to join the blocks. This was done by reattaching two squares at a time to the knitting machine bed, knitting one row, and casting off. To join the rows, I used a 10/2 lavender cotton. It was a contrast in both color and yarn weight compared to the rest of the sweater. On the outside of the sweater, the lavender yarn created an interesting stitch that was both structural and decorative. The inside of the piece had an even more unusual look. However, I noticed it too late and was unable to take advantage of the texture. I will keep it in mind for future work.

I finished the sweater by knitting solid mulberry sleeves based on the flat pattern. The edge of the collar, the hem of the sleeves, and the waist were completed with a narrow knitted rust band.



PPD Computer Designed Sweater Detail

Part 2: The PPD Computer Designed Sweater

When I thought about trying to translate my sketch book designs and Celtic knotwork to clothing, I saw the PPD computer as my primary tool. I began this piece by referring to several technical Celtic design books and my own drawings. I interpreted these designs onto graph paper, which were then programmed on the computer, and fed into the knitting machine.

Next, the samples were made. Now, I could see where I needed to modify the design and corrected the pattern on the computer. The following group of samples were knitted to test different color combinations, yarns, and tensions. The first sample, involved two slightly different shades of purplish 5/2 cottons. Then, a silk thread was added that gave the surface a little spark, but there still was not enough contrast. At last, I tried a crimped purple rayon with a 20/2 purple cotton for one color, and a 5/2 green cotton with two silk threads for the other color. This gave the computer pattern enough contrast to distinguish the design, while the surface and texture became rich and alive.

Next, I drafted a simple pattern to use as a guideline to shape the garment. This piece was designed to be slightly fitted, following the natural curves of the body. To achieve this I had to increase and decrease the number of stitches or width on the knitting machine. I logged everything in my notebook. As I finished with the bodice of this piece, I found myself completely disenchanted and very unsatisfied with the results. I realized I had drifted away from my initial visualization. The computer knitted design looked like a sweater that I may see at any department store. I stopped and started over.



The Blended Sweater

Part 3: The Blended Sweater

I found one aspect of the computer sweater successful, the silk threads. So at the suggestion of Professor Lenderman, I tried to knit using only the silk threads. A large variety of earthy colors were available. I concentrated on the green family with shades ranging from a deep green to a sappy yellow green. Other hues were thrown in as accents such as some steel blues, grays, yellows, and several values of orange ranging from nutmeg to peach. I sorted the colors and placed them in groupings from dark to light.

Before I started knitting, I draped a rough pattern on my dress form, so that I had a shape to follow. After doing a few samples, I decided to use four silk threads at a time on tension three. I started knitting from the bottom of the vest, working towards the shoulder. The first fifty rows were almost black in color. From that point on, every twenty-five rows I replaced one silk thread with a lighter colored thread. This created a gradual gradation from the bottom to the top of the piece.

I became enthused by the interesting blending of the four threads within the knitted structure. The process is similar to pointillism in painting, where there is a grouping of several colors close together that create a new color. The silk gave the vest a wonderful hand or the way a fabric feels to touch, a gentle feminine drape, and a hint of luxury.

The vest consisted of six separate pieces. There were two of each of the following: the front bodice, back bodice, and the collar. All the information on the pieces such as the increasing and decreasing of the width and color

changes were recorded as the work was being done. I found this to be tedious, but necessary. It took away the fun and spontaneity that I was searching for in the thesis.

I did find a little bit of spontaneity in the collar piece. The first surprise was the interesting color change, when the collar was placed over the bodice pieces. In the back, the dark green V-shape collar dominantly lays over the lighter shades on the top of the bodice. The front coloration changes were a little more subtle. The front of the collar continues to gradate to the lighter shades of green the lightest being at the point. This point reaches well into the medium shades of green in the front of the bodice.

There was a second surprise with the collar. Originally it was designed to be a long, flat piece that narrowed to a point. As I was ironing the pieces of the sweater, I noticed how the points naturally rolled. The curled up ends reminded me of a three dimensional version of Celtic Knotwork and they also possessed the organic quality of my sketches.

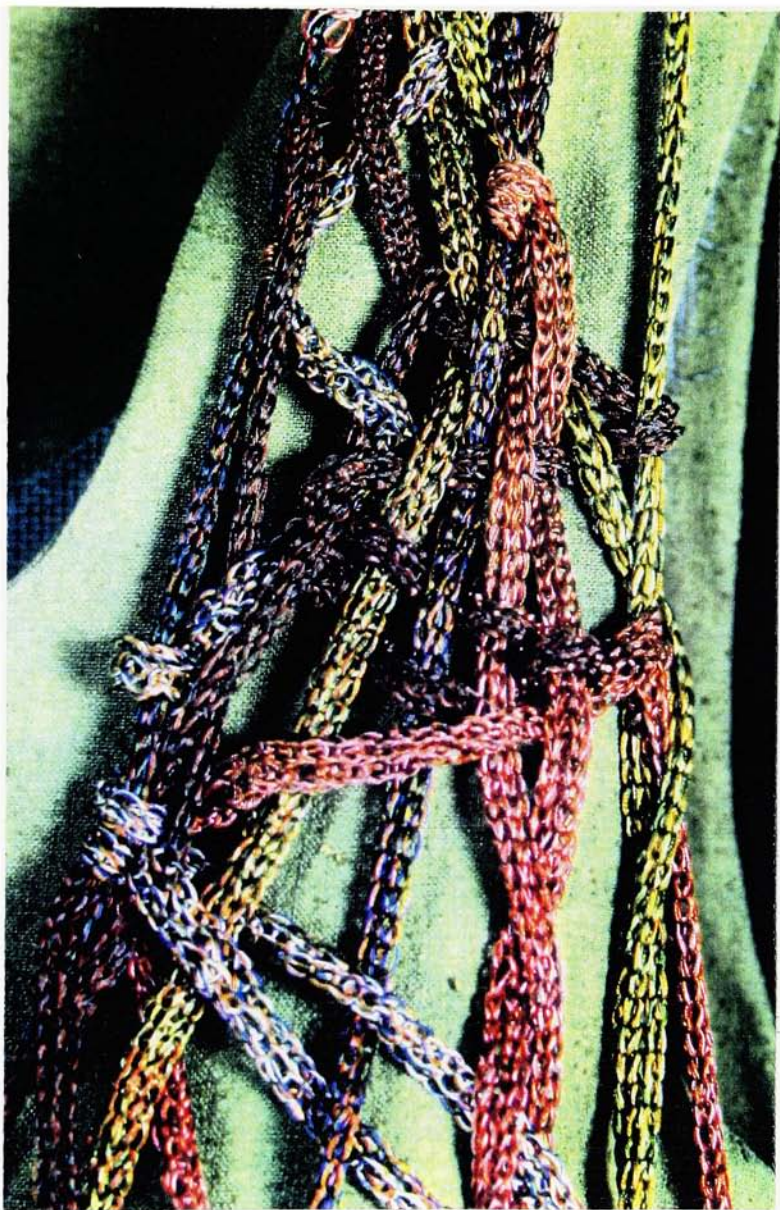
As I continued working on this piece, my mind was skipping ahead to new ideas. I recalled knitting cord like structures last spring when I did my exploration with the knitting machine. I began to think about how I could use the silk threads, cords, and continue to blend colors.



Crannog Front View



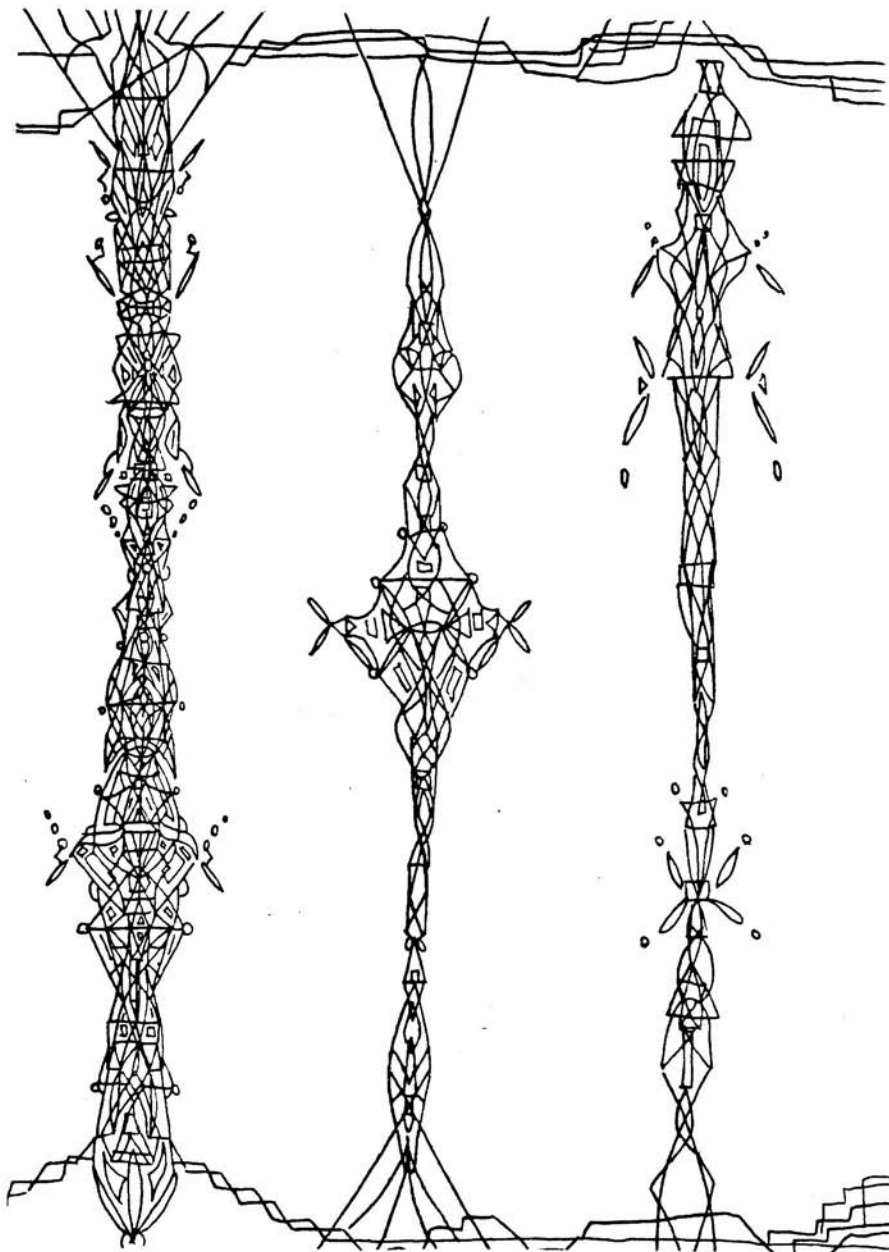
Crannog Back View



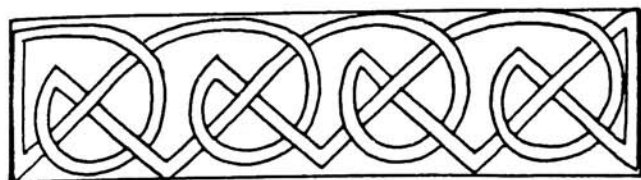
Crannog Front Detail



Crannog Back Detail



Sketchbook Influence for Crannog



Celtic Knotwork Influences for Crannog

Chapter 3
The Coil Collection
Part 1: Crannog

When I started to work with the cords again, I was not considering them as the principle material for the sweaters. The cords were initially conceived as a braid or twining element. I began to knit the ropes on the machine with four silk threads at a time on tension three using six needles. Once there was a small bundle of cords, I started to play with them. The idea that sweaters do not need to be solid structures occurred to me. I stopped, stared at my pile of cords and wondered, "How would I construct a garment from this heap of spaghetti?"

My dress form was in the corner inviting me to drape the cords over her body. I placed the first few cords freely around the form. Then I decided that I had finally found a technique that intrigued me, so I continued to knit spaghetti.

The cords were knitted in random lengths, partially as a rebellion to all the careful calculating of my previous works. Also, I had no idea what lengths might be needed. The ropes not only varied in length, but in color. I continued to use four different colored silk threads at a time. The mixture of colored silk threads within the cords was more concentrated than in the previous vest, because they were so narrow the threads seem to diffuse into one another. Since the threads often incorporated a complementary color combination, the cords seemed to vibrate. This effect was also due to the natural sheen of the silk, which lent it a metallic feel as well. The palette of this first piece was muted and consisted of greens, a few browns, a hint of blue, and a contrasting orange.

Once I had a sufficient number of cords knitted, I was ready to create. I started with a few cords laid on the form in a loose warp and weft like structure. These were pinned in place and created the initial boundaries of the piece, or under structure. The piece began to grow naturally from this framework. Simple slip knots, over hand knots and pinning were used to put more lines into the piece. Ultimately, the cords had transformed into lines.

Since I was working symmetrically, I recalled a style that permeates my early sketch book. I realized that I approached the piece in the same way as when I paint or draw. I reached a point of spontaneity and freedom that I never achieved before while working on fashion pieces. As I carried on, I saw another resemblance to Celtic knotwork in the twining and twisting of the work.

To have a stronger allusion to Celtic art, I consciously tried to follow some basic techniques of traditional knotwork. One is the idea of consistently overlapping lines in a similar direction. This becomes identical to the twining technique in basketry, when done in a three dimensional format. With these simple twining and off of the loom weaving processes, I started to make the piece more dense in some areas. I debated filling in the spaces, but decided there was an interesting play of positive and negative space. This raised a question of how far does a piece have to go to be finished.

To finish the piece, which had now assumed the form of a bolero, I used a small crochet hook and the excess thread from the knitting to secure the ends. As I worked these ends into the piece, I noticed the soft movement and the unfinished quality of having some of the cords dangle freely. This added the

fun and spontaneity which I was grasping for when I embarked on the thesis. It also would add whimsical interest when it was displayed in the ultimate gallery, which is the human body.



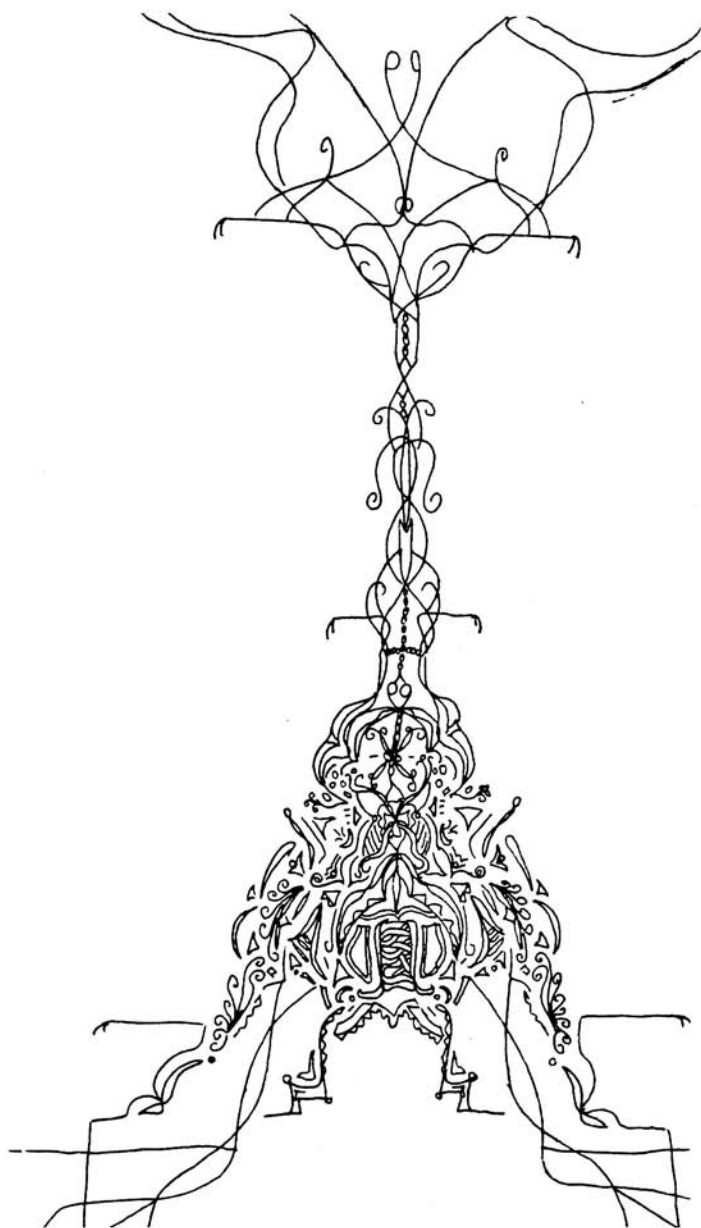
Kilarney Front View



Kilarney Back View



Kilarney Detail



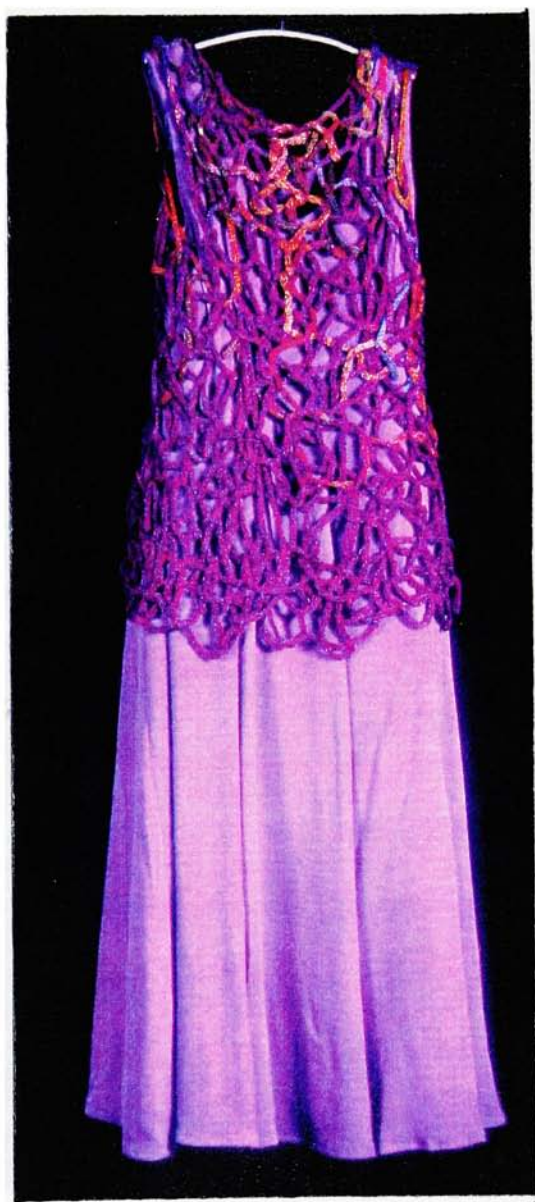
Sketchbook Influence for Kilarney

Part 2: Kilarney

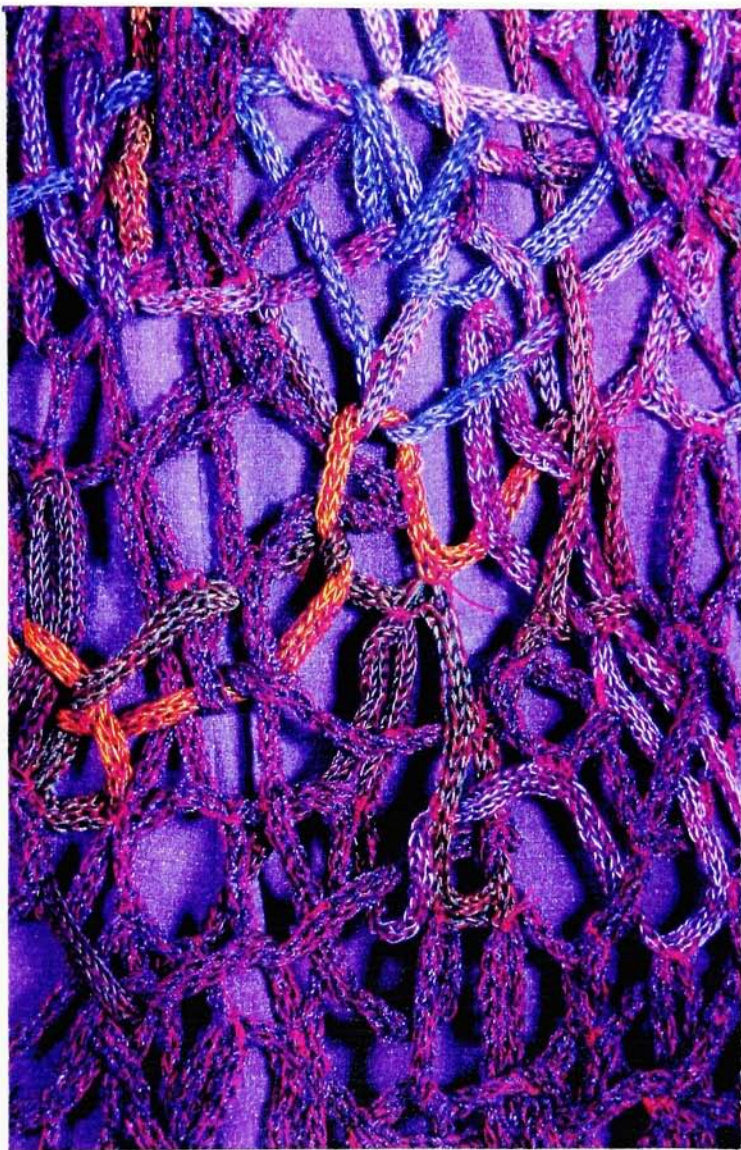
With one cord piece completed, I decided to start another. I used a similar plan of attack, which was to work without one. Again, I began by knitting many different lengths of cords. This time the cords were doubled in length, and there was more contrast in the values of their color. The dominant hue of this piece was blue. The longest cords had an extra interest of hints of a copper-colored Lurex.

The construction of Kilarney began by twisting a metallic and a duller strand around the neck of my dress form. The lines flowed down over the bust and towards the center back of the form. This set an immediate outline for this piece, which was going to be a vest.

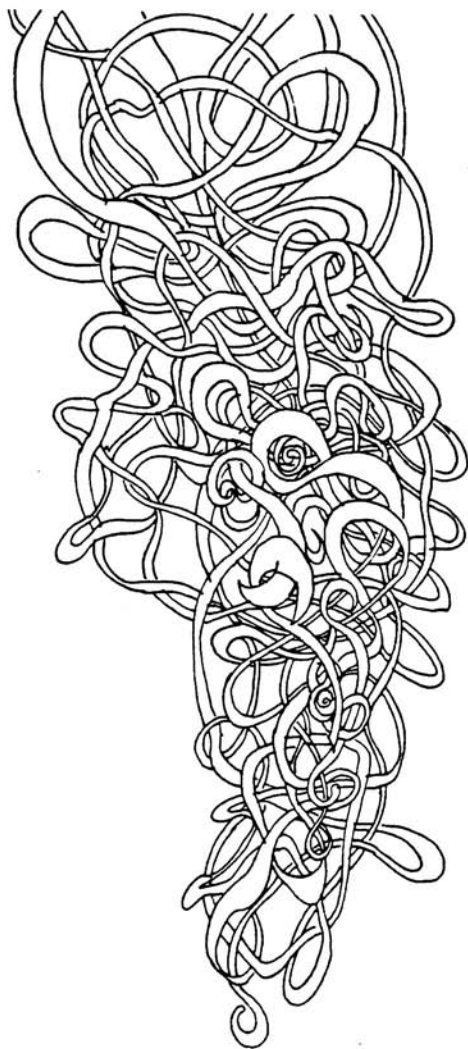
The twisted lines varied the line weight and destined the piece to become controlled in the construction. From the initial outline, I placed a few knitted bands horizontally around the body. Again, I used over-hand knots in the construction. From that point on, the garment structure assumed a combination between netting and twining characteristics. This formation became more open than Crannog. This garment allows the strands to move freely and act as ease in garment construction, which easily adapts the piece to several sizes.



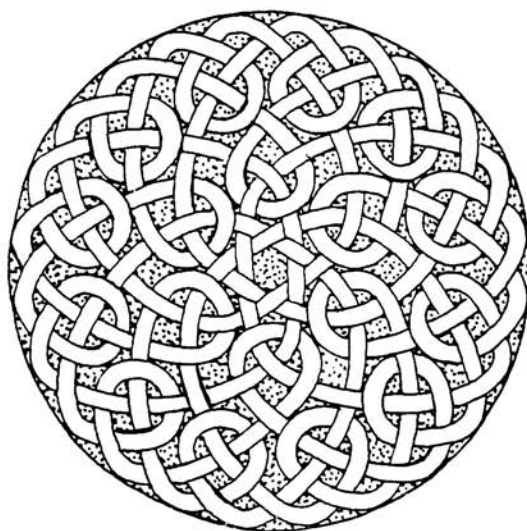
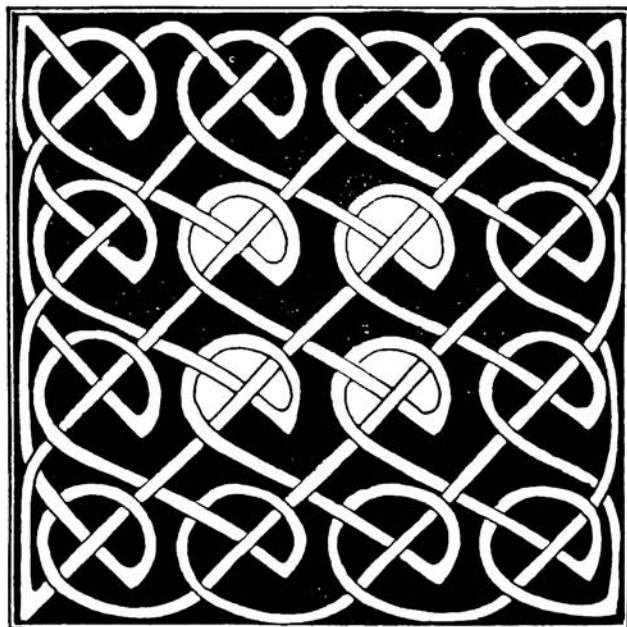
Toiled Coil



Toiled Coil Detail



Sketchbook Influence for Toiled Coil



Celtic Influences for Toiled Coil

Part 3: Toiled Coil

After finishing two silk pieces in this technique, I was determined to try a slightly different approach. First, I altered the length of the cords by 500 and 2000 rows each. I borrowed the crimped purple rayon from the computer design for a varied texture and combined it with a 20/2 garnet cotton. The cotton created a complimentary dullness in regards to the rayon. These were knitted with five needles on tension ten. I also made some lengths by mixing three different colored 20/2 cottons on tension nine. As I knitted the solid cotton cords, I switched one colored yarn randomly every couple of hundred rows. Later in building this piece, the change of yarn created an illusion of a variegated yarn. The process of blending yarns was similar to the silk threads.

At the suggestion of Professor Lenderman, I used the part button on the knitting machine. This gave the ropes a loose, rounded construction. With the alterations in materials and structure, the character of the cords became less formal in comparison to the previous garments. Keeping this in mind, I took a different approach when I started the framework for this piece.

Once more, I used the dress form as a mold. The formation started at the neck and used three, different long cords. These were alternately worked around the model. The basic structure grew from loosely pinned loops. Some of the loops turned back on themselves, while others reached further down on the form to be twisted in later. Unlike the first two pieces, the placement of lines were free and asymmetrical.

Since the tunic was not symmetrical, it assumed an organic quality. This

was emphasized by intertwining and overlapping the various cords. As I worked on the piece, the shape and design of the garment formed itself by slowly traveling down the dress form. To compliment that aspect, there were no clearly defined edges.

The dominant colors of Toiled Coil were garnet and purple. I placed the variegated cords toward the center top of the tunic. This created a subtle focal point. The color transformation in these cords had the sensitivity of watercolors. To add some contrast to this area, I connected some of the loops with copper wire. Later, it was suggested that annealed wire may have been more appropriate, because it would have better related with the color scheme.

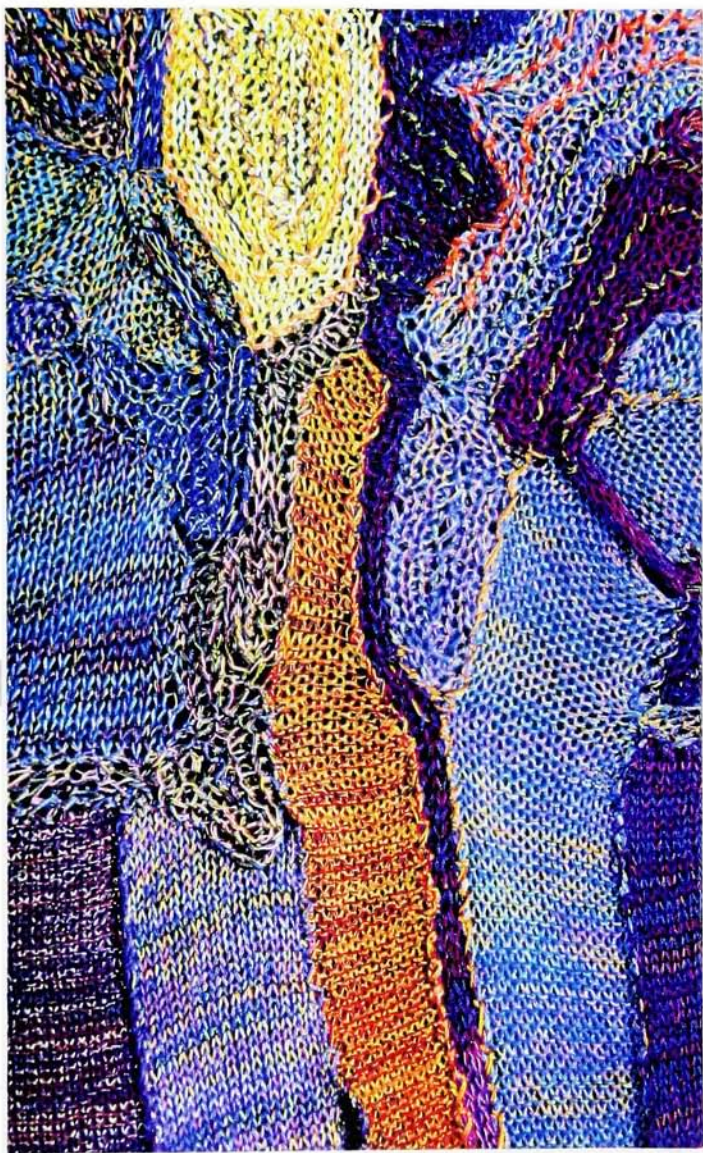
The rest of the construction was done by hand-sewing the intersecting points together, after they were pinned into place. I used a 20/2 garnet colored cotton thread and needle. The stitches were not hidden. In this way, throughout the tunic there are small concentrated spots of the garnet yarn. This technique solved the problem of the ornament being an integral part of the structure.



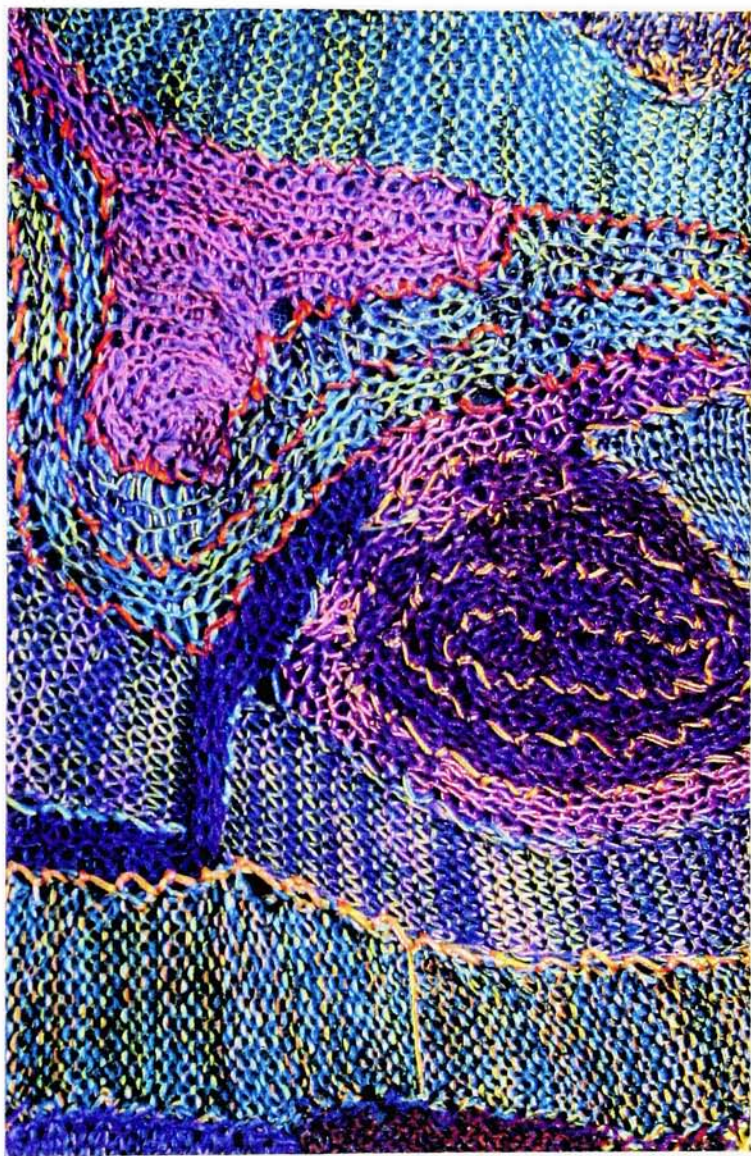
Swirlwhirl Front View



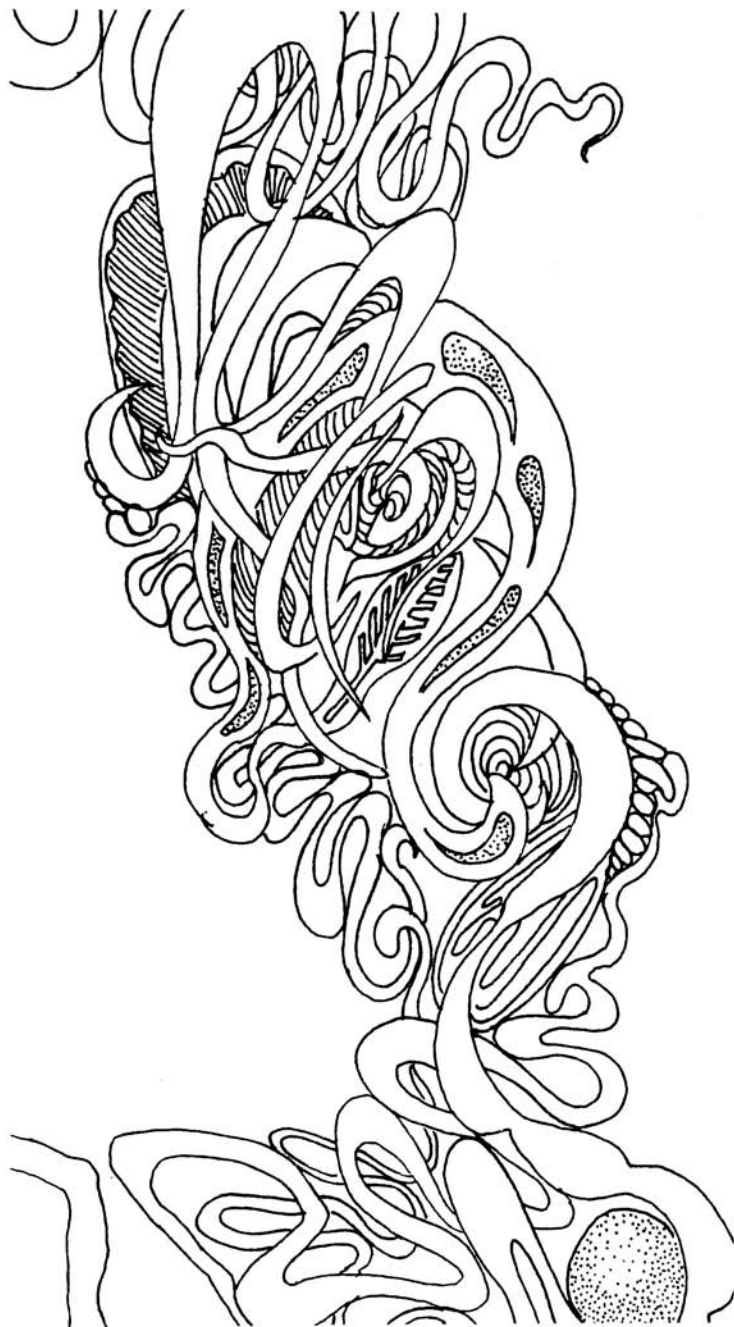
Swirlwhirl Back View



Swirlwhirl Front Detail



Swirlwhirl Back Detail



Sketchbook Influence for Swirlwhirl



Celtic Influence for Swirlwhirl

Part 4: Swirlwhirl

Up to this point, I saw the nuances of my sketching style and Celtic art emerge in the last three pieces. Now, I strived for a truly painterly end result. Once again, the piece originated from a randomly knitted bundle of cords. But this time I employed a polychromatic palette, which was a melding of all the colors from the previous three pieces. Subsequently, I decided incorporate different line weights, which would be more noticeable than in Kilarney. To accomplish this, the flat strips that were knitted varied in width. In some of the cords and strips, a silk thread was added to create an extra spark as well as a contrast between luster and dullness.

As before, the garment was formed over the dress form. I started by creating a loose outline around the neck and armholes. Various pieces were tentatively pinned into position. A few cords were pinned into spiral shapes inspired by carvings found at Newgrange in Ireland. Using a crochet hook and a contrasting 10/2 cotton yarn, the spirals became a solid form. Next to, and between them, I placed some wider knitted strips. Some of strips were placed right side up, while others displayed the purl side. This variation, in the company with swirling cords, formed three distinct surface textures. As open the spaces were filled, the surrounding shape echoed the form and continued flowing into the next shape. In many cases the strips had to follow a gradual curve and ease into position.

The formation of the bodice was a slow flow of organic shapes and colors. As I worked on Swirlwhirl, I was aware of my attempt to include my

painting sensibilities. To achieve this, I struggled to create focal points, which, unlike Toiled Coil, consisted of an all over pattern. In the front, the focal point was the strongest. It stretched down into the skirt of the dress reached up towards the center bodice and out to the shoulders. This was emphasized by the gold and yellow color of the forms. In the back, the focal point was more subtle. Again the primary color was yellow, which gently scooped down from the back neckline towards the waistline. There, it lightly bounced along the waistline. From the vantage point the yellow was complimented by the purplish cast of the various panels that created the skirt of the dress.

The skirt was made from semi-randomly knitted strips. The width increased toward the bottom of each panel to construct a flare. The hem was intentionally uneven to accent the organic nature of the dress.

This piece became my favorite among my thesis explorations. This was because I gained the greatest freedom in its creation. I was passionate from the beginning of this work to the end. I was thrilled. It possessed an original character. It had some reference to historical lace or crochet work, as seen in the previous three works. Later in critique, it was mentioned that some of my work had a folksy quality. I tend to agree with that observation. With a small objection, I believe that I have stretched it further than the folk art style of the 1960's and 1970's. I feel that today's society is searching for hand-made items in a world of overwhelming technology.

Chapter 4

Framing and Displaying

I had now finished the four knitted pieces using the cord techniques and was faced with the questions of: how to complete the work and how to display it for the gallery show. I had already designated the knitwear as the central focus, however the pieces required an undergarment to unify the collection and to formalize the ensembles.

For Crannog, Kilarney and Swirlwhirl, I decided to make long under dresses. These dresses served the same purpose as a frame on a painting. Their intent was to give a background for the open knit work to rest upon and to compliment the knitted colors. They intensified the positive and negative spaces of each knitted garment. Each dress was made from silk. I dyed the fabrics for Crannog and Swirlwhirl, while the fabric for Kilarney was commercially bought.

The dresses were draped on my dress form. I referred to the design lines of the knitwear to construct each pattern. For example, Crannog was a bolero style, so the dress echoed the higher waistline. From the waist the dress gradually flared out to enhance the cords that flow out from the bolero. The flare of the dress will increase the movement of the cords when it is worn by a person. The structure of Kilarney was simpler, so I made a simple sheath in a midnight blue. This dramatically offset the palette of the piece. Finally, for Swirlwhirl, I used a slightly crimped silk fabric in a color that was similar to the purple garnet yarn in the tunic. The dress had to flow as freely as the knitted

counterpart, so I draped a pattern that followed the princess line into a full skirt. The flared dresses united the silhouette of Toiled Coil with the rest of the collection. The dresses also consisted of the three bold colors used in Toiled Coil. The collection was now complete and ready for display.

My inspiration for the display of the collection came from Elsa Schiaparelli. For the 1937 Paris Exhibition, she refused to use mannequins for display and instead hung her garments casually on a wash line.³ This started me thinking about showing my pieces in such an unexpected fashion.

The work demanded a three-dimensional form, so I needed to make body armatures. I built the torsos from steel window screening, which I managed to mold on the dress form. I slipped the pieces over the forms and hoped to hang them from the ceiling of the gallery with fishing line. The screening was not quite strong enough to support the dresses, so I opted to add something to keep the piece from collapsing. I used slightly bent bronze rods as a hanger for the screen armatures. I filed a small groove in the bronze to hold the fishing line in place. Then, I suspended the work from the ceiling.

I was happy with the display. The pieces assumed the movement of mobiles. This gave them a life of their own and alluded to how they might appear on the human form. The hanging dresses were easy to walk around, and thus were inviting and casual. Since the three-dimensional form had a sculptural quality, they tied in well with the environment of the gallery.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In conclusion, I feel that this body of work was a beginning. I could see my exploration of the cord structure continue to grow in fashion designs, mixed media, and even sculpture. I will always continue to experiment with the blending of color in all my endeavors. Furthermore, I will try to balance various media and techniques within a single piece. I enjoyed creating a body of work rather than the usual one time experiment. The idea of constructing a cohesive series was a challenge. This opened the door to the method of trial and error, which is where the discoveries were made. I am happy that I was able to force myself to break down the traditional sweater idea after the first three unsuccessful pieces.

Endnotes

- 1 Schiaparelli, E. 1954. Shocking Life. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc.
- 2 Poiret, P. 1931. The King of Fashion. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company

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